

THE BUILDING BETTER CONNECTIONS WITH FAMILIES PROJECT

SUMMARY REPORT

Wisconsin Institute for Public Policy and Service Research Partners

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“There is a thirst and a desire for more parents to get involved in the classroom again. Get more volunteers into the building.”

“Covid shut down parent engagement.”

“We (school personnel) are always talking about the need to do parent engagement better and it was really nice to have an example of what a model of that would look like.”

“There are a lot of parents who are not typically involved. How do you get parents who are not at other things to attend [a focus group]?”

“I don’t feel like it is my responsibility to continuously reach out and ask to be included ...I feel like that’s the responsibility of the school to make sure that parents are welcomed and included in the education process so that we’re working together.”

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Parents and caregivers play a significant role in supporting children's learning.¹ The **Building Better Connections with Families Project**² used a facilitated small group discussion format to gather feedback and insights directly from parents that can be used to create better partnerships between schools and parents and to improve the learning environment for students. The intent of this process was to evaluate the effectiveness of focus groups as a tool or method for fostering parent engagement and well as to solicit parent feedback on the current state of engagement with schools. This report summarizes the feedback obtained from the focus groups and provides information from the perspective of parents that spans a range of topics such as:

- What role do parents want to play in partnership with schools to support students' learning?
- How can schools better engage with and improve communication with parents?
- What makes parents feel like their voice, feedback, and opinions matter or are valued by their school?
- How can schools improve how they honor or value the diversity of families in school communities?
- What is most important to parents when thinking about their child's mental health and well-being?
- How can parents build connections with other parents in the school setting?
- Are focus groups a useful way to engage with parents?

To gather feedback from parents, the Wisconsin Institute for Public Policy (WIPPS) Research Partners conducted 9 focus group discussions in the spring of 2022 with a total of 36 parents of elementary and middle school students from 5 schools from across Wisconsin.³ Of the 5 participating schools, 2 were elementary schools (C.H. Bird Elementary School in Sun Prairie and North Crawford Elementary School in North Crawford) and 3 were middle schools (D.C. Everest Middle School in Weston, Hudson Middle School in Hudson, and James Madison Middle School in Appleton). School representatives were not present at the focus groups and were later interviewed to get their feedback on the process and information gathered.

Report Highlights

1 The focus group process. Both the school representatives and the parents who participated in the focus group process expressed a desire for increased communication, and opportunities for greater involvement, collaboration, and engagement with each other. Both school representatives and parents found that focus groups could be an effective means of information sharing and promoting school-parent and parent-parent engagement.

- Parents who participated in the focus groups expressed that they generally valued the opportunity to participate in the focus group process and they liked the format and content of the discussion. For many, they valued hearing the perspectives and experiences of other

¹ Throughout this summary we use the term *parents* as a shorthand term to include caregivers, guardians, adoptive parents, etc.

² The Building Better Connections with Families Project was developed collaboratively by the offices of Governor Tony Evers and First Lady Kathy Evers, the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, the Wisconsin Office of Children's Mental Health, and the University of Wisconsin's (UW) Wisconsin Institute for Public Policy and Service (WIPPS) Research Partners. Funding for this project was provided by the National Governors' Association Center for Best Practices.

³ WIPPS Research Partners is a unit of the Wisconsin Institute for Public Policy and Service (WIPPS) located at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point at Wausau campus. Part of the mission of WIPPS Research Partners is to respond to community needs by providing information and to help citizens and communities make decisions about issues that matter to them. In this project, our goal was to provide information from the perspective of parents on how to improve parent engagement with schools, as well as to consider the role and value of focus groups as a method to obtain feedback from parents. Objectivity and non-partisanship are core values of WIPPS Research Partners; we have no policy "agenda" in conducting this work. We do not make recommendations or take positions on public policy issues.

parents in a small-group setting and indicated that it was a rare experience. The parents noted that having a third-party facilitate the discussions was conducive to feeling comfortable being open, yet there could also be benefits of school officials hearing information directly. The parents who participated in the focus groups said they would be interested in participating in future focus group discussions. However, they want to know their voice and feedback will have an impact and that it will be used in a meaningful way.

- School personnel found the focus group process to be valuable and that it yielded important information, but many found it challenging to recruit parents to participate. Most indicated that they tried several methods and would go about recruitment efforts even more assertively or differently if they used a focus group format again in the future. Most indicated they would rely more on direct contacts (e.g., phone calls, one-to-one text messaging and in-person recruiting at parent teacher conferences or other in-person events) or involve more teachers and staff in the recruiting efforts. Despite this, most of the schools indicated that they heard from some parents that they “don’t usually hear from.” All planned to share the information gathered widely with school and/or district administration, and some already had follow-up meetings planned to discuss next steps.

2 Challenges with engagement. Many of the parents in the focus groups say they are struggling with the basics of communication, information-gathering, and opportunities for involvement with their school, making it harder for them to be engaged at a deeper level.⁴

3 Communication. Parent concerns related to communication (and lack thereof) was a consistent theme across most of the focus groups. Parents expressed a desire to be partners with schools and teachers and they expressed a need for more transparent, consistent, and clear communication about how they can support their students’ learning. While some parents indicated that they had open lines of communication with teachers and administrators, many parents want improved communication. They would like to get immediate and more direct feedback from teachers and have an opportunity to communicate back with teachers as well. Parents want to work with the teachers to understand behaviors that may be going on at school and they also would like more proactive and timely communication; many described situations where they felt feedback was provided too late. Several parents expressed that they need more communication about when their child is falling behind and about what is being taught in the classroom. Making interactions with school and teachers more personal, unique, and specific to their child was important to many parents; they would like to hear positive feedback as well. Several parents noted that communication became more of a challenge as their children entered middle school and no longer had only one classroom teacher. Outside of the classroom, several parents expressed an interest in having a voice at their school, with some questioning whether they do have a voice or input. Mechanisms for authentically gathering and incorporating parent input was recognized as important to some parents, in contrast to feedback-gathering that may come across as performative or insincere.

⁴ Examples of involvement could be participating as a classroom helper, lunchroom aid, or field trip chaperone; examples of engagement could be a parent and teacher collaborating to develop a learning strategy in an area a child may be struggling with, or involving parents and family members in curriculum-related discussions and decisions. Of course, the concepts of involvement and engagement are not mutually exclusive and there are many other examples; we recognize that the ways in which parents connect with schools exist along a continuum.

4 Opportunities for involvement. For the most part, the parents who participated in the focus group discussions do not currently feel involved with their schools and they perceive there to be very limited opportunities to be “at school.” In many cases, the parents attributed the current lack of opportunities for involvement to COVID-19 restrictions. Most expressed that they do not feel welcome at school because they are physically prevented from entering the buildings, volunteering in classrooms, and attending field trips. They lamented that there are very few opportunities for parents to be present at or involved with the school, and if there are such opportunities, they are not aware of them. They also noted that they lacked clarity on when face-to-face interactions with teachers are appropriate. Several parents noted that events that include parents can help make the school environment more approachable and welcoming and can provide parents with opportunities to interact and to develop a partnership with the teachers. Parents also noted that many parents in their communities may be struggling with the necessities of everyday life and that being involved with or engaged with school would be challenging.

5 Traditional communication tools. Many parents expressed frustration about the application of some of the common methods schools use to keep parents informed: parent teacher conferences and online educational/communication platforms such as Canvas and Infinite Campus. Many parents of middle-schoolers expressed that teacher conferences are generally too short, too rushed, superficial, and that they are not always able to connect with their child’s core teachers. Concerns with how schools are using tools such as Canvas and Infinite Campus were also spontaneously raised in almost every group. While some found these tools valuable, others suggested that the technology can create a barrier with too many platforms to navigate. Seeing missing assignments in Canvas would cause some was parents to confront their child about them, only to find out that the assignments were completed and not yet entered by the teacher. For some, this caused them to “check-out” of the online applications all together.

6 Social and emotional skills and mental health. There was a range of perspectives on the role of schools in helping students learn social and emotional skills. Some parents felt strongly that it was solely their responsibility to help their child learn these skills, while others believe that the school plays a role, especially for students who do not have a parental presence at home. Parents in several groups expressed wanting to be informed about what their students are being taught with respect to topics related to mental health and well-being. For some parents, this was important so they could decide whether to opt out of a social and emotional learning curriculum; for others, it was motivated by wanting to reinforce at home the concepts students were being exposed to at school. Several parents expressed that student services and counselors need to be more accessible and noted a need for additional mental health services, in general and in school.

7 Diversity and cultural responsiveness. Many of the parents who participated in the focus groups believe that students need to be cognizant of diversity but they do not feel informed about how topics surrounding diversity and cultural responsiveness are being addressed at their school. Several parents noted that this is a complex topic to address. Parents expressed an interest knowing what information is being communicated to students in advance so they have an opportunity to initiate conversations with their child. At several schools the parents perceive that their school and community in general “is not very diverse” and as a result, they do not see significant issues with regard to diversity. Parents did not generally identify specific things that their school was doing to promote or celebrate diversity. The parents at one school noted the importance of their kids seeing themselves reflected in those that work at school. Several noted that, from their perspective, there is a general lack of racial diversity

among the school staff. Parents also discussed the need to think about diversity from the perspective of things that are not necessarily visible. For example, the economically disadvantaged, single parent households, sexual orientation, or students who may have ADHD, dyslexia, or neurodiversity.

8 **Parent to parent engagement.** The focus group participants noted that there are relatively few (if any) opportunities to interact with other parents and caregivers at their school in what they perceived to be a meaningful way. Several noted that the focus group discussion was one of their first opportunities to do so and they appreciated talking with other parents about their experiences and their children. Parents at some focus groups exchanged contact information, set up additional times to meet or asked for additional focus group opportunities. Some arents also suggested having small groups focused on specific topics where parents could connect with other parents with similar interests or struggles would be beneficial.

Additional information about all of the findings above are summarized in the report sections that follow. A copy of the interview guide used in each of the focus groups can be found in Appendix C.

OVERVIEW

Background and Project Goals

Parents and caregivers play a significant role in supporting children's learning.⁵ The **Building Better Connections with Families Project** used a facilitated small group discussion format to gather feedback and insights directly from parents that can be used to create better partnerships between schools and parents and to improve the learning environment for students. The intent of this focus group process was to evaluate its effectiveness in fostering parent engagement and well as to solicit parent feedback on the current state of engagement with schools. This report summarizes the feedback obtained from the focus groups and provides information from the perspective of parents that spans a range of topics such as:

- What role do parents want to play in partnership with schools to support students' learning?
- How can schools better engage with and improve communication with parents?
- What makes parents feel like their voice, feedback, and opinions matter or are valued by their school?
- How can schools improve how they honor or value the diversity of families in school communities?
- What is most important to parents when thinking about their child's mental health and well-being and the development of their social and emotional skills?
- How can schools partner with parents to support students' overall mental health and well-being?
- How can parents build connections with other parents in the school setting?
- Are focus groups a useful way to engage with parents?

Schools from across Wisconsin and beyond that are seeking to improve how they engage and partner with families in supporting students' learning may find this report to be of interest. In addition, this project provides insights into the use of focus groups and small group discussion formats as a way to gather feedback from parents.

The Building Better Connections with Families Project was developed collaboratively by the offices of Governor Tony Evers and First Lady Kathy Evers, the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, the Wisconsin Office of Children's Mental Health, and the University of Wisconsin's (UW) Wisconsin Institute for Public Policy and Service (WIPPS) Research Partners. Funding for this project was provided by the National Governors' Association Center for Best Practices.

Approach and Methods

To gather feedback from parents, WIPPS Research Partners conducted 9 focus group discussions in the spring of 2022 with a total of 36 parents of elementary and middle school students from 5 schools from across Wisconsin.⁶ See Table 1 for details of when the focus groups were conducted and participant registration numbers by school. Of the 5 participating schools, 2 were elementary schools (C.H. Bird Elementary School in

⁵Throughout this summary we use the term *parents* as a shorthand term to include caregivers, guardians, adoptive parents, etc.

⁶ WIPPS Research Partners is a unit of the Wisconsin Institute for Public Policy and Service (WIPPS) located at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point at Wausau campus. Part of the mission of WIPPS Research Partners is to respond to community needs by providing information and to help citizens and communities make decisions about issues that matter to them. In this project, our goal was to provide information from the perspective of parents on how to improve parent engagement with schools, as well as to consider the role and value of focus groups as a method to obtain feedback from parents. Objectivity and non-partisanship are core values of WIPPS Research Partners; we have no policy "agenda" in conducting this work. We do not make recommendations or take positions on public policy issues.

Sun Prairie and North Crawford Elementary School in North Crawford) and 3 were middle schools (D.C. Everest Middle School in Weston, Hudson Middle School in Hudson, and James Madison Middle School in Appleton). This opportunity was offered to a small number of school districts who applied for School-Based Mental Health Grants in Wisconsin and who had displayed interest or readiness in parent-engagement and/or met other criteria for school size, type, location and populations served. Those same factors were applied in selecting the final participants in an effort to select a diversity of schools that were representative of Wisconsin's population, geography and school size/type. Special emphasis was placed on a district's willingness to emphasize inclusivity and to actively solicit the participation of parents who currently have low levels of engagement or who may be experiencing barriers to engagement. Schools were selected for participation by the Project Advisory Team after completing a brief online application. School representatives were not present at the focus groups and were later interviewed to get their feedback on the process and information gathered.

Separate focus groups were held with parents at each of the five designated school sites and virtual and in-person options were offered. A total of 4 in-person and 5 virtual sessions were conducted. Virtual discussions were held using Zoom.

Table 1 - Focus Group Dates and Participant Numbers

School	Date and Time	Format	Registrations	Participants
C.H. Bird Elementary - Sun Prairie	Thursday, March 10 3:30 to 5:30 pm	In-person	5	7
C.H. Bird Elementary - Sun Prairie	Tuesday, March 15 6:00 to 8:00 pm	Virtual	3	2
Hudson Middle School - Hudson	Tuesday, March 29 5:30 to 7:30 pm	In-person	6	5
Hudson Middle School - Hudson	Tuesday, April 5 5:30 to 7:30 pm	Virtual	5	4
DC Everest Middle School* - Weston	Monday, April 18 5:30 to 7:30 pm	In-person	8	6
James Madison Middle School - Appleton	Tuesday, May 3 6:00 to 8:00 pm	In-person	5	3
James Madison Middle School - Appleton	Wednesday, May 4 5:30 to 7:30 pm	Virtual	5	4
North Crawford Elementary** - North Crawford	Thursday, May 5 noon to 1:00 pm	Virtual	5	4
North Crawford Elementary - North Crawford	Thursday, May 5 7:00 to 8:00 pm	Virtual	2	1
TOTAL			44	36

* A DC Everest virtual session scheduled on Tuesday, April 12 was canceled due to lack of registrations.

** A North Crawford in-person session for Wednesday, April 13 was canceled due to lack of registrations; two virtual sessions were scheduled as alternatives.

A total of 44 parents registered for the discussions across the 5 schools; ultimately 36 parents participated, resulting in a 19% "no-show" rate. To ensure that parents could speak freely, no school staff, teachers, counselors, or administrators were present during the discussions. WIPPS staff facilitated and observed the focus groups. A detailed interview guide was used by the facilitators to gather open and honest feedback from parents (see Appendix C for a copy of the discussion guide.)

Each school was responsible for recruiting parents for participation in their respective focus groups. They could use whatever method they felt would work best within the context of their school in terms of communicating this opportunity to parents. Even with flexible scheduling, offering a choice of virtual or in-person options, and offering incentives such as child care and gift cards, recruitment was challenging. The original project design called for 10 focus groups (2 at each school), with up to a maximum of 10 participants in each group (100 total across all 5 schools). Ultimately, 9 focus groups with 36 participants were conducted; at the D.C. Everest Middle School, the virtual session was canceled due to lack of registrations. It should be clearly stated that while the participation was lower than planned, the focus groups did yield valuable insights and there was considerable consistency and convergence of themes across groups. In other words, the lower participation did not compromise our ability to identify themes across groups.

Schools used several approaches to recruiting parents. For example, at Hudson Middle School, the Director of Student Services was the project champion. She asked each member of the Hudson Middle School's student services and learning staff to provide her with a list of 10 parents with whom she could share information about the opportunity. The list was to represent a full spectrum of backgrounds, ages of children, previous involvement in school events, IEPs, or who have been in contact with counselors regarding mental health concerns for their child. All 30 of these families were sent the flyer with the registration link and personal follow-up outreach was done to encourage participation. In some cases, the parents who were unable to participate indicated that while they "loved the idea," they could not make it on either of the nights offered. One of the take-aways for the Hudson Middle School's project representative was that in the future, if they were to conduct a focus group again, they would work "even harder to get those voices heard."

At James Madison Elementary in Appleton, one of the 8th grade English teachers was the project champion. She used a combination of strategies to communicate information about the project to parents, including school-wide emails and sending paper copies home with students who are participating in clubs for which she was directly involved as an advisor. The James Madison School representative noted that in some ways, recruitment was more difficult because other teachers were not necessarily aware of the project and that if their school were to do something similar again, expanding the communication to involve other teachers in parent recruitment could be helpful. She also noted that inclusion of the QR code on the flyer made it challenging to send the flyer in their email system. In the future they would make an email-friendly flyer and a poster-friendly flyer.

At D.C. Everest Middle School, the information about the focus groups was included in the school's electronic newsletter. However, this yielded few registrations, with the Dean of Students suspecting that the parents might have just skimmed the newsletter and did not see the information. She indicated that she would promote or word the information on the flyer differently next time. Ultimately, she asked the district's volunteer coordinator to help identify parent participants, noting though the parents that participated in their group were more likely to be parents who are typically more engaged with school.

At C.H. Bird Elementary in Sun Prairie, the director of the Black Student Union and the Community School Liaison was the project champion. Information about the project was shared at parent-teacher conferences. She also invited parents of students who are members of the Black Student Union. The students had a role in the planning of a dinner that proceeded the focus group. The students invited and hosted their parents, resulting in a strong turn-out and enthusiasm from the parents who attended the in-person group.

At North Crawford Elementary, the principal was the main project champion. She started out by sending the flyer in the mail to reach more marginalized families and also sent flyers home with students. When this did not yield more than a few participants, she sent texts through Google Voice and found this was the most productive way for her to reach her parents. A post on the school's Facebook page was also used to generate interest among the parents in the focus groups. This approach inadvertently resulted in a number of non-school-affiliated individuals registering for a virtual focus group. Since the purpose of the focus group was to gather information specifically from North Crawford Elementary parents, feedback from non-affiliated parents was not included in this report. Ultimately if she were to do a similar project again, the principal noted that she would start with texting first and she would not use Facebook. She also noted that the family newsletter was also not productive. Ultimately, she felt they had pretty good representation and that the parents/guardians were mostly not the ones they typically see at things.

Schools scheduled the dates and times that they felt would work best based for their parents. Each school was provided a customized informational flyer created by WIPPS Research Partners that they could use to communicate the project goals with parents/caregivers and to recruit participants. This was provided in a Word and PDF version. WIPPS also created a custom Google registration form for each school and handled the set-up of the Zoom meetings. Appendix A and Appendix B provide examples of recruitment materials. Each school had these materials at least one month in advance in order to allow enough time for recruitment. Other ideas for increasing participation in the future were to offer shorter meetings (one hour rather than two hours.) The North Crawford virtual session that was held over the lunch hour was well-attended.

Schools were provided with a \$1,000 stipend to use for recruitment. These funds could be used for incentives such as gift cards or food, as well as staff time. Each school could create their own incentives such as offering child care, providing refreshments, and gift cards. See Table 2 for a summary of the recruitment incentives that were provided by each school.

Table 2 - Summary of Recruitment Incentives

School	Child Care Offered for In-Person?	Refreshments for In-Person?	Gift Card
C.H. Bird Elementary - Sun Prairie	Yes	Yes	\$25
Hudson Middle School - Hudson	Yes	Yes	\$25
DC Everest Middle School - Weston*	No	Yes	\$100 (1 winner)
James Madison Middle School - Appleton	No	Yes	\$25
North Crawford Elementary - North Crawford**	n/a	n/a	\$50

* A \$25 card was offered to virtual attendees; this group was canceled due to lack of registrations.

** The amount of the gift card was increased from \$25 to \$50 to increase participation.

The parents received a gift card in appreciation of their participation. Each discussion lasted about 1.5 hours.⁷ Table 3 summarizes the demographic characteristics of the participants. The majority of the participants across all of the schools were female. Approximately 17 percent reported that their family received free or reduced lunch through the school lunch program. The vast majority of the participants were white. These demographics are relevant to understanding the background of the parents whose voices were included in the

⁷ Groups were generally scheduled for 2-hour blocks, except for North Crawford where 1-hour meetings were planned. Of those scheduled for 2 hours, most of the discussions were completed in 1.5 hours rather than 2.

project, and potentially whose voices were not included in the project. It also worth noting that the participants represented diverse perspectives which became evident during the course of the discussions. In addition to gender, race/ethnicity, and income status, some participants described their unique family structures or situations (for example, widowed, divorced, single parent, adoptee) or their child's unique perspectives based on medical or mental health conditions, special education plans, gender identification, sibling dynamics, etc.

Table 3 - Participant Demographics

GENDER	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
Male	11	31%
Female	24	67%
Non-binary	0	0%
Did not wish to report	1	3%
TOTAL	36	100%
FREE OR REDUCED LUNCH		
Yes	6	17%
No	24	67%
Did not wish to report	6	17%
TOTAL	36	100%
RACE/ETHNICITY		
African descent (black)	3	8%
American Indian/Alaskan	0	0%
Asian descent	1	3%
Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	0	0%
Hispanic/Latino descent	0	0%
European descent (white)	24	67%
Two or more ethnicities	4	11%
Other	0	0%
Did not wish to report	4	11%
TOTAL	36	100%

A Note About Focus Groups

It is important to remember that focus group methods are not intended to yield results or insights that are generalizable to a larger population (in this case, the population of all parents of elementary or middle school students in the participating schools). Rather, focus groups are used to better understand the reasons underlying individuals' perspectives or the range of perspectives on a given topic, or to provide insights about how a situation is perceived and experienced. The information shared in this report reflects the insights, feedback, and experiences of the participants with whom we spoke. For readability, convenience, and to improve the flow of the narrative, throughout the report we sometimes use terminology such as "Participants reported..." or "Participants said..." Or "Parents reported..." or "Parents said..." These are shorthand references to the individuals who participated in the focus groups and should not be interpreted as reflective of the views of all parents.

Given the nature of the topics discussed and differences in individual experiences, there may be different voices and multiple views that need to be presented. Our goal is to represent the range of views expressed by those who participated in the discussions. With the exception of specifying when a comment was made by “one individual,” this focus group report does not report the exact frequency or quantity with which comments or opinions are expressed. The use of numeric references in a focus group report can sometimes lead readers to inadvertently think about responses in terms of percentages (X percent of people think this; Y percent think that), which can then lead to false generalizations. Those kinds of specific characterizations are better suited for a methodology where a larger number of individuals are sampled, such as a survey.

Lastly, we may use terminology to convey the pervasiveness of a theme such as “many” or “most”; “some” or “several”; or “a few.” How these characterizations are applied is largely at the discretion of the analyst/observer, as they can depend on the context of the question; whether comments or themes related to a question come up at other points in the discussion; and other cues such as body language of the participants (head nodding). To minimize some of the inherent subjectivity, the characterizations of comments were reviewed by other members of the facilitation team and/or focus group observers. This additional review served as a “check” on the balance and completeness of the summary of the comments and to ensure that the report accurately reflected the focus groups discussions. Paraphrased quotes are included in order to illustrate the participants’ responses. In some cases, these have been edited for readability, but the respondent’s intention is reflected in the comment. Supporting quotes on the following pages have been edited for readability, without compromising the intent. Each school was provided with a summary of their focus groups for review; the school-specific summary was also shared with the participants.

HIGHLIGHTS OF PARENT FEEDBACK

Parent and Caregiver Engagement with School and Teachers

INVOLVEMENT, ENGAGEMENT AND PARTNERSHIP

We initiated this project wanting to learn more from parents and caregivers about the topic of “parent engagement,” recognizing that this term includes a spectrum of ways that parents may partner with – or have opportunities to partner with – schools that make them feel welcome and included in their children’s learning and development. We wanted to learn more about what parent engagement means from the perspective of parents without prescribing our own definitions during the focus group discussions or leading with examples.

While we did not impose any particular framework on the discussions, when analyzing and summarizing the parent feedback, we wanted to listen for and understand distinctions parents may make between their experiences being “involved” in their schools vs. being “engaged” in their schools. The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development articulates differences in these terms as follows: “One of the dictionary definitions of *involve* is ‘to enfold or envelope,’ whereas one of the meanings of *engage* is ‘to come together and interlock.’ Thus, involvement implies *doing to*; in contrast, engagement implies *doing with*. A school striving for family involvement often leads with its mouth—identifying projects, needs, and goals and then telling parents how they can contribute. A school striving for parent engagement, on the other hand, tends to lead with its ears—listening to what parents think, dream, and worry about. The goal of family engagement is not to serve clients but to gain partners.”⁸ Examples of involvement could be participating as a classroom helper, lunchroom aid, or field trip chaperone; examples of engagement could be a parent and teacher collaborating to develop a learning strategy in an area a child may be struggling with, or involving parents and family members in curriculum-related discussions and decisions. Of course, the concepts or involvement and engagement are not mutually exclusive and there are many other examples; we recognize that the ways in which parents connect with schools exist along a continuum.

What we learned in reviewing the focus group discussions is that, when talking with parents about their experiences, many used the terms of “being involved” and “being engaged” interchangeably and often implying a similar meaning. More commonly, parents cited or described situations that might be typically characterized as being involved at school; less commonly, parents cited or described situations that might be typically characterized as being engaged with their school. In general, and as discussed in more detail in the following sections, many parents seemed to be struggling with simply being involved with their school, making it that much harder to be engaged at a deeper level.

Parents expressed a desire to be partners with schools and teachers

Many parents expressed that they want to be a “partner” with their child’s teachers and they want more transparent, consistent and clear communication about how they can support their students’ learning. One parent noted, “I feel this pressure to be sure my kids are learning what they are supposed to learn and doing what they are supposed to do. I want them to do the best they can do and I feel like I have to do all the catch up. I have to play more of the helper role than I expected (for a child who is in special education.)”

Parents expressed that they want more opportunities to partner with teachers and to give feedback about what is working and what is not working for their student. Parents would like to give more immediate feedback to teachers, not later on when issues have already occurred or after the fact. They would like to have

⁸ See <https://www.ascd.org/el/articles/involvement-or-engagement>

more of a “working relationship” with teachers and suggested that it would be nice to have a mechanism to be able to communicate with teachers on a more regular or ongoing basis. One parent noted, “For me to feel like I have to continuously reach out to a teacher or the school and ask these questions, it makes me feel like I’m not being included in her education. I don’t feel like it is my responsibility to continuously reach out and ask for inclusion. I feel like that’s the responsibility of the school to make sure that parents are welcomed and included in that education process so that we’re working together.”

Several parents expressed that they feel like they are only involved in their child’s education when their children are in trouble. One parent shared, “There’s nothing coming home to work on, period. The only time I’m able to get any material to help him learn what they want him to learn is when he’s in trouble.” Another parent expressed frustration that she has to get angry in order to feel as if her child’s school will listen to her. She noted, “I get no results unless I’m like the typical angry black woman. They don’t do anything if I come educated and try to talk to them civilized. I get nothing. Now if I come in here screaming and yelling and snapping at somebody, oh instantly, I’ve got the head principal calling me, I have this person calling me, ‘oh, let’s make an action plan.’ Why do I have to get so angry before you do something when I’m telling you ‘Hey, I want to be an active parent.’”

For several other parents, building a relationship with each of their student’s teachers is important in order to better communicate about students’ needs. For example, one parent wants her daughter to report on her academics, but the parent would still like teachers to provide that reassurance that everything is going well. Several parents expressed that they would like to have a relationship with teachers where they feel comfortable reaching out and at the same time, the teachers would feel comfortable reaching out to them. Parents mentioned the importance of building connections between the parent, student, and teacher, including during the middle school years. One noted, “Sixth graders are not ready to have a parent ‘un-involved.’ As time goes on, we take more of a backseat. But we need to be a big component.”

Some parents expressed that many parents in their community – due to jobs, other family obligations, etc. – may be struggling with the necessities of everyday life and that being engaged with school (or even involved with school) would be challenging.

Several parents noted the need for better communication between parents and schools regarding students with learning disabilities. One parent noted that, “I would rather be a conduit of communication and supports but I have to do a lot of educating [of staff.] We have a 504 [plan.] I wish I could be confident that we are getting what [the student] needs. Instead of feeling like the accountability partner.” One parent noted that they have had a “tough journey with the school” and navigating resources for their student. “If I don’t ask in the right way, they won’t tell me what the resources are or how to access [them]. We don’t know how to ask in the right way. And you need to ask or you don’t find out about the resources. If you use certain terms, then they shuttle you down a certain path. [It can be] incredibly frustrating to navigate. Advocating is a full-time job.”

An additional parent whose child has an Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) and has had some behavioral challenges this year has appreciated the personal and direct communication she has had with the school principal in order to work together on some strategies to help the student. The parent appreciates that if there are issues that come up at school, the principal takes the time to handle the situation and reach out to the parent. The parent noted that they have not always had this kind of rapport with the school in terms of how to best-support their child. The parent noted, “she gets on a very personal level with us in a very professional way. She is willing to listen to me and hear what I have to say and try things that I suggest.” The

parent also wishes that she had the same kind of partnership with other teachers and staff and so that the principal did not necessarily need to be the primary person supporting their student.

Making engagement personal

Parents viewed their interactions with school and teachers as needing to be unique to and specific for each child. One parent noted, "Involvement is unique for each kid. I don't worry about my kid who is very focused. [For my other student], I have met every teacher, counselor, and aid for my youngest. Engagement is driven by my children and what they need from me." Parents also described that their relationships vary considerably from teacher to teacher and there is not a lot of consistency across teachers in how teachers interact with parents regarding their students. One parent noted, "I've had a lot of great experiences with teachers. [One asked me], 'how can I help advocate for your son?' No one has ever asked me that before. Another teacher had no clue [my son] had issues. How is that possible?" A few parents noted that their approach as a parent is impacted by their own upbringing and their own parents' approaches to communication with teachers.

Providing a voice in decision-making

Several parents expressed an interest in having a voice at their school, with one noting, "I don't know that I have a voice. Being responsive to my inquiry is not having a voice. I can't think of a time they have sought out my voice as a parent." Another noted, "We get surveys from the district. There is seeking of information at the district level, but I am not sure about the school level. There has been good communication with [one] teacher, and I have been heard."

At one of the participating schools, the parents had very positive things to say about a recent parent advisory group that met related to the possible formation of a charter school in their district. Those meetings and the process used to include parent input made them feel like they "had a voice" and helped to reduce their concerns. One parent noted, "That's the first time I've ever been asked by anyone to be involved in a school process...that was appreciated and a lot of parents found value in it. And even parents who were unable to attend appreciated that parents were involved in the decision-making process." These same parents contrasted this with other meetings convened by the school related to a recent referendum, with one parent noting that the referendum advisory board "was a joke." They did not feel that those meetings were about authentically listening and getting input, as they felt there was a "preset agenda." The meetings seemed performative and the outcomes seemed predetermined and the parent feedback "did not influence things in the least."

The parents attending that particular focus group attributed the difference in the two processes to the approaches taken; they felt that the charter school meetings were run by the principal in an open and transparent manner and were really focused on asking parents their thoughts and how they wanted the process handled. For the referendum meetings, the architectural firm was running the meetings and gave the impression that they had already decided what they were going to do, with "no real weight given to what parents thought." "The meetings were pointless." One parent noted that it appeared as if the plan was going to move forward without getting parent and caregiver feedback. One parent noted that the process used to get input on the charter school topic could provide a model for getting input on other topics. "I [liked the principal's] effort to involve parents; I liked that it was morphed into more general feedback." And "Involving parents is really important. I'd love to see that continue. It could be used to get input on other kinds of issues."

At another school, parents discussed how, from their perspective, "COVID shutdown parent engagement." They expressed their concerns about this topic relative to the ability (or lack thereof) of parents to engage with their local school board due to virtual meeting formats. From their perspective, the virtual meeting

format used by the school board limited parents' ability to participate. One parent noted that from their perspective, the school board meetings sent a message that the members "don't want to hear what you have to say." and "they want things the way they want and don't care about parents' opinions." An example given was the approach of summarizing parent emails/feedback at school board meetings and picking and choosing which emails to share. The perception expressed by some of the parents is that the school board "shut down communication."

OPPORTUNITIES FOR INVOLVEMENT

Parents generally do not currently feel involved with their schools

For the most part, the parents who participated in the focus group discussions do not currently feel involved with their schools and they perceive there to be very limited opportunities to be "at school." In many cases, parents attributed the current lack of opportunity to be involved to COVID restrictions. Most expressed that they do not feel welcome at school because they are physically prevented from entering the buildings, volunteering in classrooms, and attending field trips. They lamented that there are very few opportunities for parents to be present at or involved with the school, and if there are such opportunities, they were not aware of them. This has resulted in, as one parent put it, "parent disengagement during COVID." One parent noted, "There was no tour, no meet the teacher, no orientation during COVID." Another commented, "It's hard to be in the building." The ability to be physically present in the school building was important for many parents. Several parents noted that events that include parents can help make the environment more approachable and welcoming and can provide parents with opportunities to interact and to develop a partnership with the teachers.

Some parents felt that if there are opportunities to be involved at school, they are not communicated well. One noted, "Volunteer opportunities aren't communicated well—there is very little notice of opportunities." Another noted that "Opportunities that are available aren't very transparent." One parent of a middle-schooler suggested that schools share at the beginning of the year a full year calendar of volunteer opportunities that may come up so that parents could see the year in advance. "Our kids are only there for two years—if we could see events ahead of time, parents could get involved from the beginning."

Parents would like opportunities to volunteer at school, attend field trips, help in the lunch room or classroom, support fundraisers, and chaperone dances. Both elementary and middle school parents are seeking these opportunities. One parent noted, "If I had the opportunity, I'd like to come in and volunteer with kids with reading and with telling time. Some of the simple things that our kids aren't getting... The small things like writing, phonics... maybe the things that are getting missed for some students. I prefer to come into a classroom and do it with the kids, so that they could feel like they get to stay in their classroom."

Barriers to parent involvement and confusion due to COVID-19 restrictions

In many cases, the parents attributed lack of involvement to COVID-19 restrictions. One parent noted, "In the past years back, they used to have opportunities for parents to come in and volunteer on a weekly basis whether it was every Tuesday for two hours. In the past they used to have field trips. You could accompany field trips... I think if they were to revisit some of those options, I think that would improve not only just the culture around here, but the parent engagement around here, and the behavior of kids around here."

Some parents reported that, due to COVID-19, they are no longer allowed into the buildings except in very limited situations, and in some cases, only when there is a behavior problem. One father noted, "I used to just come up here anyway on my own. A lot of times they don't let you in [school]. ...[you] can't let your parents in

today, but then you let me in when things are going bad?" Several other fathers noted that they wished they could be more involved and present at school.

In many cases, the parents noted that barriers created by COVID-19 restrictions made them unsure of what was allowed at school and they lacked clarity on when face-to-face interactions with teachers are appropriate. A few noted that it is unclear to them whether they are allowed at school and what is "ok" vs. "not ok" given the COVID-19 climate. One parent noted, "What might be tough is that we've had two years of not wanting the parents in the school. It's trying to get them back into feeling like hey, it's ok to come in. I haven't done a random drop in for quite some time." Another stated, "Is it ok to visit the classroom? I don't know since COVID, what is allowed?" For some parents, schools are not being consistent in terms of what is allowed, with one noting, "We crammed in here for back-to-school night. But wait a minute, we can't have conferences face-to-face?" Some found it frustrating that the buildings are "closed" and they cannot approach their teachers in-person. One noted, "That's a problem. Zooming is not adequate." Parents felt that the year "started out strong with an invitation to Open House," which gave them concrete things they could talk about with their students. But "then we weren't allowed to develop or build upon that," as there are limited opportunities to volunteer or be present at school.

Continue to involve parents of middle schoolers

In the case of middle school parents, they also noted that in general, there are perhaps fewer opportunities to be involved at the middle school level than there are at the elementary level. Parents expressed an interest in volunteer activities but, "There are not options at the middle school." Another noted, "I don't know of the middle school asking for help with clubs, speaking to classes, etc. This is something the school could take advantage of." Parents recognized that students are more "on their own" in middle school. But "Parents want to be engaged." Although they noted it is "harder to engage [in middle school] when kids have 9 different teachers." One parent noted that middle school kids do not necessarily want their parents in the building or parents are only invited there for discipline purposes. A few parents felt like they are out of the loop at the middle school compared to when their kids were in elementary school. They want to be able to participate more in school events and be able to volunteer. They noted that there is more fluidity [between parents and school] when parents were able to participate in and attend school events.

COMMUNICATION

More direct feedback and two-way communication

Parent concerns related to communication (and lack thereof) was a consistent theme across most of the focus groups. Many parents want improved communication about schedules, what is going on in classrooms, and how their children are doing in school. One of the parents noted that their child's teacher has been reaching out with a bi-weekly newsletter with updates on what is going on in the classroom. They like that they can reply and get feedback from the teacher and can engage in two-way communication. "I can ask questions and feel like there is an open line of communication" with the teacher.

Parents would like to get immediate and more direct feedback from teachers and have an opportunity to communicate back with teachers as well. One noted that it would be nice to have a mechanism to communicate more frequently. One parent noted an interest in growing opportunities to partner with teachers more regularly on content areas that a student may be struggling with (outside of the parent-teacher conference format); a communication mechanism that would be closer in proximity to when the student is actually learning the material. "More of a direct, non-threatening feedback loop." The parent referenced a social media app that was used at the elementary level that they wished could be used at the middle school.

One parent wondered if their expectations regarding communication were too much to ask of teachers and that their “ideal” may not be realistic. “Ideally, we would be on the same team. We both want my child to be successful. We are communicating a lot. They ask me questions about my child.”

Some parents did report that they had open lines of communication with the school and their children’s teachers. They described instances where, if they did have a concern, they could contact the teacher and would be assured of a quick response. Several noted that they specifically liked the bi-weekly newsletter sent home by the teacher. “[We are] getting better communication sent home via email. I appreciate that so I have an idea of what is going on.” Another parent from this same school noted that “Teachers are communicative. I know if we did reach out with an issue, it would be addressed.” Some parents seemed to agree that there is a climate of openness in terms of communication and they are receiving information, but also can go to the principal or to the teachers, if needed. “The principal has set the tone for communication.”

One parent noted that they had partnered with the school’s reading specialist and their child’s teacher to share ideas and activities related to how to help their child.

More accessible and streamlined ways of accessing information

Several parents expressed a need for clearer and more accessible methods for communicating with teachers. One parent noted, “There is no way to really communicate with teachers, [at least] not consistently anyway.” Some parents expressed that they reach out directly to teachers when they have concerns, and in some cases, those parents felt that the “teachers have stepped up and have communicated.” The teachers seem to be the front-line “go to” people when there are concerns, rather than to the counselors or to the principal. One parent noted, “It’s not an ideal way, but we’ve had the most success at the level of the teachers,” adding “there is a disconnect between what the teachers are doing and the counselors and the principal. There is more support at the level of the teachers.”

Parents expressed a need for more consistent and streamlined communication, noting “We don’t know where to find what we need” and “We need to figure out a better way to do it.” One parent suggested the use of text messaging as a way to communicate with parents. Another noted, “I just need a blurb. I can’t find [what I need]. I’m searching for [what I need] through this web of files. I give up. It’s too easy to shoot all this information at us and we are trying to figure out what is important.”

Communication that is timely and more proximal to when issues arise

Parents want to work with the teachers to understand behaviors that may be going on at school and they want communication to happen sooner/earlier before something becomes a crisis. Parents would like proactive and timely communication; many described situations where feedback was provided too late, from their perspective. One parent reiterated the need to communicate issues “in the moment,” not after the fact when it is too late to address them. Another expressed this as, “Bring things up...It wouldn’t have grown into this big deal.”

This same interest in proactive communication is relevant to when a student may be struggling or have issues. Several parents expressed that they need more communication about when their child is falling behind, perhaps with a letter home that must be signed by the parent outlining a plan for improvement based on a mutual understanding of what could “work best” to help the student. A personal letter was recommended over an email in this kind of situation. Another parent agreed with the need for more timely communication. She wants to know when an issue is starting, “not when it’s about to blow up because then it’s too late.”

Other parents echoed this sentiment, “I wish I had known she wasn’t doing well in reading before her report card because it was shocking to me it was below grade level. We’ve had a conference in between there and it wasn’t mentioned...I wish we had that feedback before.”

Several parents noted that they also value proactive communication when there are topics coming up at school that may be “controversial.” One noted that, “I appreciated when the FACE teacher emailed and told us when sex ed was going to be taught, and what would be covered. It gave us an opportunity to prep our child ahead of time. The teacher also made herself available to talk.”

Striking a balance between positive and negative feedback

Very few parents could describe instances where a teacher or staff member made a phone call home for any reason and instead described a reliance on emails. Sometimes calls are made for behavior issues, yet parents expressed that often, concerns about behavior-related items are often brought up too late. They noted that if they had been contacted sooner, they could have helped suggest solutions. Many felt that communication is initiated by the school or the teacher only when there is something negative to report or when there is a behavior or discipline issue.

There were only a few examples of parents who could recall receiving positive feedback going home from teachers. For example, one parent stated, “I like that they don’t only call me when he’s doing wrong but they also call and let me know when he’s doing something good or he just had a good day. So, I like that, too, because I don’t like just getting the negative calls. I like hearing the good things too.” She noted that these communications were coming both from the principal and the teacher, as well as the student’s afterschool teacher. Another parent noted that she likes that the students can earn a “tweet” [a blue reward slip] if they help clean up their area or do something positive. The students can turn these in for a reward. The parent noted that she liked this program since it provides the student with a tangible item that notifies the student and the parent that “you did something great and we want to recognize that right away and encourage that.”

Parents also noted the need for parents to communicate with teachers when they are doing a great job and the need to show gratitude and kindness to the teachers.

Being actively aware of classroom learning

Several parents described “being in the dark” about what their students are learning. They would like an overview of what a student is going to be learning over the course of the year; they did not necessarily like that they have to go into Canvas (a web-based learning management system used by schools) to see this information.⁹ One parent noted that he likes to be aware of what is going on in any given week and appreciates it when teachers take the time to send emails about what is being covered. For example, “Hey, this is what we are doing this week.”

PARENT-TEACHER CONFERENCES

Many parents of middle-schoolers expressed that teacher conferences are generally too short and too rushed and are superficial, with one noting, “It’s as if teachers are just trying to get through the meeting. It does not feel genuine. The time they have allotted for parents is short.” Some of the parents expressed a concern that they are not always able to connect with their child’s core teachers at conferences and in one case, a parent

⁹ Canvas is a web-based software tool that allows schools to manage digital learning, create and present online learning materials and assess student learning, and for students to engage in courses and receive feedback about skill development and learning achievement. See <https://community.canvaslms.com/t5/Canvas-Basics-Guide/What-is-Canvas/ta-p/45>

expressed that for the one class where their child is having an issue, the teacher was not at conferences. The current format of parent teacher conferences was viewed as a consistent area of opportunity to improve. “I don’t love the 5-minute conferences. Teachers express that they wish that they had more time.” Another noted, “It’s like speed-dating. Here are the grades, no missing assignments, any questions?” Several parents questioned the value of conferences given the current format. “Conferences? It’s not worth it to me. I schedule a separate time.”

The time allotted for conferences is not adequate, with one parent noting, “Teacher conferences need to be more than 5 minutes. There’s got to be a better way. I find more value when they are done virtually. They are on time and no one is cutting you in line.” Another parent noted, “The 5 minutes were too short.” When the parent attempted to follow-up via email, there was a delay in getting responses. One parent did make a point to note that she was unable to meet with a specific teacher at a scheduled time due to a backlog in the teacher’s conference schedule. That teacher took the time that evening after conferences were completed to call her and that was very meaningful for the parent. The teacher called her and said, ‘I am sorry I missed your conference.’ We talked for 17 minutes. She took the time to talk to me and listen to me.” One parent noted that they like the way conferences are scheduled at their local high school, as it provides the parent an opportunity to email if a longer conference is needed.

One parent noted that their student has prepared a self-reflection PowerPoint as part of a class assignment and this was shared during conferences. This helped to make the conference a positive experience.

A few parents expressed that they are not clear if their child should attend conferences with them, noting, “Should I bring my student? Or not? Should all 3 of us be there? What is the expectation?”

Most of the elementary parents did not express concerns about being able to access their teachers during parent teacher conferences, with a few noting that teachers are willing to meet and talk outside of teacher conference time as well. One parent noted, “I have never felt pushed for time or waiting for a teacher or had trouble getting feedback from a teacher. The issues [with conferences] are not at the elementary end, they are more the older end of the school spectrum.” One parent noted that sometimes they receive a letter that “no conference needed,” but that they would still appreciate having the opportunity to connect with the teacher regardless. “Honestly, I don’t know if I love getting that letter because I kind of just want to go in and have that conversation either way.”

TECHNOLOGY BARRIERS

While we did not specifically ask parents about tools such as Canvas and Infinite Campus, these platforms were spontaneously raised in almost every group. Parents had mixed views of tools such as Canvas and Infinite Campus. One parent noted of Canvas, “It’s a good tool. You should be able to access grades, see missed assignments and you can customize it to get updates. It’s helpful to be able to customize depending on how your kids are doing.” One parent noted that they use Canvas frequently to bridge communication with their student. The parent used the example of a student getting a “2” on an assignment; they could look in Canvas at the rubric and see why the student received that grade. By keeping tabs on things in Canvas, they could go into the parent-teacher conference more informed. Others had less favorable views of Canvas, with one saying, “Canvas is a nightmare to navigate.” Yet another noted, “Some teachers do a good job using Canvas and integrating it; others do not enter things into it in a timely fashion.” One parent pondered, “How many assignments [does a student need to miss] before a teacher reaches out to a parent?” Another parent noted, “I am numb to Canvas notifications. I get 7 notifications at 9:30 at night. Which ones do you look at?” Along these same lines, another noted, “I get 78 emails from Canvas...” [suggesting that this is too much].

One elementary school parent noted that she is a regular Infinite Campus user and she uses it to keep track of what is being covered in class; she also uses SeeSaw. “They are very good at sending home projects that they’re working on so I can actually see ‘all right, today they worked on letters A through G’. And then SeeSaw is a program that they use a lot, so I can see what is going on just about every day.” Another parent in the same session reported a different experience, stating, “I actually don’t know much about what my son does during the day. I feel like I got more information when he did virtual learning because they kind of had to [share information]. But now that he is back in class, I don’t even know what classes he has during the day.”

In several groups, parents suggested that technology can create a barrier to parent engagement with too many platforms to navigate. Some wondered why schools have two online systems like Canvas and Infinite Campus. One noted, “Having two platforms is confusing—should be one or the other.”

Inconsistent or incomplete tracking of homework in applications like Canvas causes parents to confront their child about missing assignments, only to find out that it was in fact completed and not yet entered by the teacher. For some parents, this caused them to stop checking and to “check-out” of the online grading applications. Another parent noted that the disconnect between what they could see in Canvas and the reality that their student did indeed complete their assignments caused them to “throw their hands up” and stop using Canvas all together. A “late assignment” flag in Canvas may not actually be late if the teacher gave the student a paper assignment; seeing a “late assignment” could cause a parent to confront their student about why they have a late assignment when in fact, the student had turned the assignment in and the teacher had manually recorded the submission.

A source of parent frustration are emails regarding late assignments. The information in the emails does not always line up with whether the assignment was actually completed and turned in. One parent noted, “There are way too many ways that information is coming and it doesn’t line up.” Others expressed frustration and confusion with all of the various mechanisms for keeping track of homework assignments. “Some teachers put the homework on the planner, some use Google Classroom, another teacher uses something else. Send a syllabus home to the parents that says ‘here’s where you find the homework, this is what they are supposed to do.’ I hope they don’t change it for high school.”

SUPPORTING TRANSITIONS TO MIDDLE SCHOOL

Parents recognized that middle school “is a different life” than elementary school, especially for students who have transitioned to middle school after “COVID years.” The importance of orientation to middle school was expressed by the parents. One parent noted that the school was very welcoming with open house and the transition to middle school made her student feel supported. A parent mentioned a specific teacher who helped make the transition for their student very smooth. The “Bridge to Middle School” program was very helpful from one parent’s perspective. The parent found that it was very helpful to support their child’s transition into middle school and they liked that, as a parent, they could come in and see the lockers, their child’s classrooms, and see what was going on without being too “overbearing.” The parents at another school agreed that the transition during the 1st quarter for their 6th graders was very smooth. The school’s expectations were respectful of the 6th graders. The parent felt that the workload was appropriate for students who were transitioning into 6th grade and that as of the second quarter expectations increased.

The parents in another group viewed the transition from elementary school to middle school as another area for improvement, not just in terms of supporting the students, but also supporting the parents. One parent noted, “The transition from elementary to middle school was horrific. We went from lots of paper to no paper

or hardly any paper.” The parent noted that, “They [the school] are failing in that regard.” Difficulties finding information were noted, “Parents have no visibility. Text books, study guides. They are impossible to find.” “Missing assignment emails” may be outdated and this is very frustrating for parents. Providing an opportunity for a parent “peer to peer” program would be helpful in terms of navigating information and keeping track of what their student is doing in middle school. There is a “huge learning curve” for parents too and it would be helpful for parents to hear from other parents about “here’s what works for me.”

Parent understanding of the technology students are using to keep track of their assignments is important to parents who want to help support their student. For example, “One of the biggest challenges to my son was not understanding Google Classroom. [We need to know] how to help the kids navigate. How to turn it in. I would love to see [information for parents in 6th grade orientation on how to navigate the technology] that would help [us] hit the ground running. Where is the Daily Planner? Where’s the homework? A support group for parents that need help with the technology piece.”

Two of the middle schools use a “house” system for organizing students. Several parents expressed that they liked the “house” set-up currently in place at the middle school. They liked that the students are in a group surrounding their lockers and that this allows the students to be closer to their teachers and to get to know them. They feel that the house model provides a good progression from elementary school to middle school. They also noted that the house system and which house a child is in can impact the kind of experience a student has and the frequency and nature of communications between parents, students, and teachers. Houses have different dynamics.

Mental Health and Wellness

A RANGE OF PERSPECTIVES ON HOW CHILDREN LEARN SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL SKILLS

There was a range of perspectives on the role of schools in helping students learn social and emotional skills. Some parents felt strongly that it was their responsibility for helping their child learn these skills, while others recognized that the school plays a role, especially for students who do not have a parental presence at home. Two comments that illustrate these differing views include one parent who stated, “Stick to algebra. Stick to basics. I will teach the ‘feelings’ stuff...I will make sure she is equipped emotionally.” But another parent countered, that for some students, “If they didn’t get some of the ‘feelings’ part here [at school], they wouldn’t get it at all.” One parent noted that their child came home asking for “alone time,” but that in their household, “We don’t do alone time at home.” In this instance, the strategy being taught to their child at school was not aligned with their personal philosophy at home.

In one group there was a lengthy discussion of the lack of parent engagement in children’s lives in general and the point was raised that there is “not a small number of kids who are struggling.” The parents in the group recognized they are in a bit of a “bubble” and that there are many kids who are “abused and neglected” and unable to access services or who are on long waiting lists for mental health support. One parent noted the importance of being able to access these services at school and wondered if mental health screening is available at school. “This is an important and a really loaded question. As I look around the table, I feel like we are not fairly representing the students that need representation. A home structure combined with the school structure is key for kids to be able to have self-esteem. For them to be confident and proud of who they are.”

PARENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON IMPORTANT SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL SKILLS

Parents were asked to talk about the social and emotional skills that they felt were important for their child to develop during their elementary and middle school years. They were asked to think about these skills in general and independent of where and how their child would learn these skills. Table 4 summarizes the comments, organized into the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) framework.¹⁰

Table 4 – Parent-Generated List of Important Social and Emotional Skills (Organized into CASEL Framework)

SELF-AWARENESS: identifying emotions and demonstrating honesty and integrity
Describing feelings and handling emotional highs and lows Putting emotions into perspective Taking responsibility and ownership [for example, for school work] and following through Taking pride in work and actions Identifying emotions and verbally expressing emotions Comfort expressing themselves and exploring who they are Self-awareness and self-image, even in the midst of negative thoughts
SELF-MANAGEMENT: exhibiting self-discipline and demonstrating agency
Confidence and self-esteem Being comfortable establishing physical boundaries and expressing needs for “personal space” Coping skills (especially coping with stressors and anxiety) and stress management Perseverance and maintaining positivity Resilience Independence Handling disappointment or being told “no” Managing emotions Self-care skills
SOCIAL AWARENESS: perspectives and demonstrating empathy
Treating others with respect Willingness to accept others who are different Handling racism Tolerance and understanding of differences Being supportive of peers, including recognizing that some peers may be facing challenges
RELATIONSHIP SKILLS: teamwork and communicating effectively
Conflict management and conflict resolution Handling bullying and dealing with “being picked on” Being able to interact with others outside of a tech environment (greeting others, saying goodbye, etc.) Building relationships and interacting with people Social skills Managing friendships and “friendship drama” Comfort meeting new people
RESPONSIBLE DECISION-MAKING: demonstrating curiosity and identifying solutions for problems
Being responsible for one’s own actions Being ok being “uncomfortable” and trying new things Problem-solving Goal-setting Decision-making

¹⁰ More information about the CASEL framework can be found at the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction’s web site at <https://dpi.wi.gov/sspw/mental-health/social-emotional-learning/theory-of-action>.

In many of the groups, topics related to daily living and “life skills” were raised including hygiene; financial literacy skills; navigating technology in a positive and safe way; rewarding positive behaviors; and self-management and responsible decision-making.

THE IMPORTANCE OF KEEPING PARENTS INFORMED

Parents in several groups expressed wanting to be informed about what their students are being taught with respect to topics related to mental health and well-being. One parent noted, “As long as they keep parents informed about what they are doing and give parents a chance to react before and not after...and give an opt-out...it’s ok.” Another parent at a different school noted, “I think a lot of people panicked at the SEL class that was here this year and I didn’t really see a problem with it. When you are in elementary school you have a counselor come in every other week. Why would [they] not have access [to this information] when they are at one of their most unstable parts of their lives?” She suggested that her school “continue to offer this class without people ‘panicking’ about it. Share the syllabus so parents know what to expect.”

The parents at one of the elementary schools noted that their school has a new SEL curriculum. The parents described that there was an opportunity to attend a training about what would be offered through the curriculum and they could sign-off on a sheet whether they wished for their child to participate. They noted that they had the option to opt out of it. One parent noted that even though the school was offering the SEL program, the school could do more to address SEL issues.

In one group, the parents discussed the need for more information about how their school is addressing several mental health-related topics. For example, one of the parents commented that Governor Evers had allocated more funding to schools for mental health, but the school district had not shared any information with parents about how they would be using the money. The parent commented, “We don’t have a SEL curriculum, so how is it going to be utilized at [our school],” referring to the state funding. Another parent noted that it would be helpful for parents to know the background of the counselors and school and that more school counselors would be helpful. Another noted the importance of explaining to parents how the school uses the mental health screener survey and that not enough information is given to parents about how the screener is used, especially in cases where there is a red-flag.

PARTNERING WITH SCHOOLS ON MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLNESS

When asked how the school could partner with parents on mental health and well-being, parents mentioned wanting to know what they are talking about with students at school so they can reinforce these conversations at home. One parent noted that she thought “small lessons are taught each day but they are just pushing out the information. You don’t know how the teachers are sharing the information. It would be great to have that [same information] communicated with parents so there is reinforcement of that at home. For example, sharing with parents what themes being covered in advisory; offering [suicide prevention] as a unit in health class; sending a text message every Monday: “This week your student is working on...anxiety skills.”

In one group, the parents felt that topics related to mental health are individually-based depending on what a specific teacher wants to do. One parent noted that, “The teacher does send the whole house an email about what they are working on... as ‘ask your kid about this.’” Other parents want more information about what is “normal” teenage behavior vs. what might be a red flag. One parent who engaged with the student’s counselor said, “I appreciate the counselors. She kept bringing up what is normal or typical and this was a relief. To know what is normal vs. what is not. Getting that perspective...calmed my worries.” It was also noted

that information on “what does an eating disorder or depression look like for a teenager or preteen” would be helpful to parents, including the specific question of “what does a kid at risk look like?”

ACCESSING SCHOOL COUNSELORS

Several parents expressed that student services and counselors need to be more accessible. One parent noted, “No one knows where student services is. How do I talk to a counselor if doors are shut? They need more [counselors] or they need to be more accessible.” In one of the middle school groups, none of the parents knew who their child’s school counselor is. Another noted, “I have to scroll way down on the web site to get to the mental health resources. I have to dig deep to find services in [school district]. Others [in other districts that the parent talked to] are surprised by that.”

One parent did appreciate the extent to which a counselor went to advocate for their student, noting “The counselor has gone above and beyond for my child and I greatly appreciate that. He communicated back to the house teacher. Some teachers are more willing than others [to communicate] for my special needs child.”

Parents discussed the need for additional mental health services, in general and in school in terms of more counselors. “Counselors are running. Sometimes literally. They have one for an entire grade?” They discussed the national mental health crisis due to COVID and that schools need more help in this area. They noted the need to reduce the stigma associated with seeking mental health care and that students need “courage to go talk to the counselor” and “it takes bravery to leave class or leave lunch and go talk to the counselor.” Another stated, “You’ve got kids in crisis.”

They noted the pervasiveness of mental health issues among students, referencing a recent suicide attempt. “There lots of similar stories. It’s out there. It’s legit that children are slipping through the cracks.” In one instance they noted it was the peers of the student who that came forward with the concern that a fellow student was contemplating suicide, reinforcing the need for peer counseling.

Parents discussed whether some mental health support could be offered during advisory periods, including opportunities for students to hear from their peers.

CREATING LESS-STRESSFUL SCHOOL ENVIRONMENTS

A few parents commented that their school environment can be stressful, noting, “Three minutes between classes is really tough. [Student] carries all of her books because she doesn’t have time to go to her locker or go to the bathroom.... [this] adds to the stress. [They] are always rushing/hurrying. Getting to the next thing.” Another noted that their daughter says it is very stressful and the hallways are chaotic. They have “10-15 minutes to eat, then [they are] forced outside. They can’t eat outside.” The parent noted that their daughter “hates school this year” and “she is rushed all day.” Another parent commented that, “20 minutes for lunch is not long enough.” The hallways are rushed, creating more stress.

This discussion also generated concerns among the parents about the topic of school safety and several parents in the in-person group mentioned instances where their kids described “not feeling safe” at school. Several described difficulties in addressing these concerns with the school. One parent noted, “He’d come home crying, which makes me want to go do something if no one else is. I just say ‘defend yourself.’ That’s all you can do if the teachers aren’t going to do it. Now you gotta do that to not be picked on. That’s when I get the phone call, and that’s why I’m not upset when I get the phone call about my son. I don’t think they can understand why I’m not upset with him. I’m upset with them because it should’ve never got to that point. It

should've all been diffused, mediated, and figured out far before anything had to take place with my involvement."

Several parents expressed concerns about their characterization of their school's strategy of "separating kids" to work on academic areas where they may be struggling and this could contribute to a student's lack of confidence and decrease in their self-esteem. One parent in particular noted that their son found this separation to be very demoralizing and detrimental to his self-esteem when singled out to work on his own. Another parent commented, "I did tell the principal I kind of felt like he was being singled out and I didn't like that. He was constantly being moved." In communicating these concerns to the principal and having a dialogue about it, the parent better understood the context and the situation. "At first, I just got an email saying he's being moved and that's it. So, once she actually sat down and heard me, and then took her time to explain things, then I felt like we were on the same page."

A few parents expressed that staffing issues are contributing to the learning environment. They expressed this as a lack of support for the teachers in classrooms, which impacts the children's learning environment, noting that, due to staff shortages and lack of support for staff, they feel that there is less ability to diffuse bad situations between students. One parent noted, "I think a lot of the responsibility needs to go back on to the district because these teachers need more support in their class because when there are some children that need more support and more attention independently, they should be given the respect that they need of staying in their classroom, and remaining included in their classroom, so they don't feel segregated from their learning group."

Cultural Responsiveness and Diversity

THE IMPORTANCE OF KEEPING PARENTS INFORMED

An interest in keeping parents informed was echoed during the conversations related to cultural responsiveness and diversity. Many parents recognized that students need to be cognizant of diversity but they are not necessarily clear about how these topics are being addressed at school. Several parents noted that this is a complex topic to address. One parent noted that, "The world is changing and language is changing. My daughter hears more things now than just a few years ago. It's a hard thing to talk about with staff and students. I haven't heard anything specific about what the school is doing around this topic."

Several parents want their school to take a more hands-on approach with diversity, with one parent noting, "[They] live their mission of being an institution that values equity and diversity, but they remain neutral and are not taking a lead to educate us about different challenges, cultures, groups. I would like to see a more proactive approach." One parent suggested looking to other schools for model approaches. Parents mentioned the importance of celebrating strengths and increasing the focus on character and connection. In one school, many of the parents did not feel like their school welcomes/includes or recognizes diversity.

One thing that some parents did express is that they want to know what information is being communicated to students and want to know this before the information is communicated so they have an opportunity to initiate conversations with their child. "It would be beneficial to have discussion on these topics, but it needs to be communicated to the parents. This is all happening. We should not be ignoring it, but they need to communicate that to parents so that we can make sure our values are still being taught." A few noted that parents should be able to opt out. "There is a fine line—a lot of parents don't want them taught these things, so give parents a head's up. It should be in the hands of the parents so they can do their own research."

One parent wished that more information was shared with parents on the extent of diversity within the school community from different perspectives. They noted, “I would love to know more about the school community. What cultures, backgrounds, to understand how diverse our school is. What languages are spoken? I would love to learn more.”

At several schools the parents recognized that their school and community in general “is not very diverse” and as a result, they do not perceive significant issues with diversity. At the same time, they did not identify specific things that the school was doing to promote or celebrate diversity. “[We] don’t live in a super diverse area, so we don’t have to manage it.” Another noted, “Our area is not diverse. My kids will have a culture shock when they get out of [our county].” “I never thought there were any issues [with diversity] but there isn’t a ton of diversity.” “I don’t see specific things that the school is doing to foster acceptance; it’s just what it is.” One parent who noted that their family and extended family is very diverse felt that the school “does a good job with it.” She noted that given the current climate of discussing racism in broader society, there needs to be ongoing discussion and communication about these topics.

In one of the groups the parents made a specific point to characterize the school community as “very homogenous and in a bubble.” But they also recognized the opportunities to think about diversity in different ways and the need for there to be more communication about diversity. “I have been told by other parents that they feel uncomfortable living [here] and they do wish there was more open communication; the topic is taboo to talk about. Kids will be better off if they can talk about it. All of those different perspectives are important.”

RECOGNIZING RACIAL AND ETHNIC DIVERSITY

The parents who participated in the focus groups noted the importance of their kids seeing themselves reflected in those that work at school. Several noted that, from their perspective, there is a general lack of racial diversity among the school staff. One parent mentioned the importance of diversity and representation in schools, a sentiment that many others agreed with. One parent commented, “Children of color need to see a greater level of diversity in this school and also need to see examples of people who look like them...I think it’s very important that children of color see that their community is represented in every aspect of school and in positions of authority.” When discussing this topic during the in-person group at this school, one of the parents noticed a large banner displayed in the front of the classroom that had photos of kids of different races/ethnicities. The parent wished that the banner was more prominently displayed at the front of the school or in a more visible location so that more students could see it.

It was surprising to one parent that there was not more discussion of Black Lives Matter at school. This parent was discouraged that every year, the school provides the “same worksheets” in February for Black History Month and students need to be exposed to more than Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks as examples of leaders in African American history year after year. She noted the importance of teaching kids about the concept of microaggressions and used the example of how saying, “I don’t see color” can be offensive. She feels there should be more open discussions of race and gender at school and these topics are not discussed enough. Another referenced recent debates in the news about Florida banning certain books and how “parents got testy about some of the story problems” in math books.

The parents in one group noted the need to have conversations about racism and once those conversations are stated, “Don’t shy away. Ignoring [the topic] doesn’t help.” One noted, “Have a platform for those [discussions.]”

A parent of a student that is mixed race felt that “...school could do better in the times we are in terms of speaking up and asking the questions, about whether it’s physical, racial, or less tangible diversity. We as a community can be more inquisitive than we are. It’s ok to ask the wrong questions. The kids need to be able to ask questions too.”

RECOGNIZING DIVERSITY THAT MAY NOT BE VISIBLE

Parents discussed the need to think about diversity from the perspective of things that are not necessarily visible. For example, the economically disadvantaged, single parent households, sexual orientation, students who may have ADHD, dyslexia, or neurodiversity. “There is a need for a deeper understanding of a diversity that is not always visible.” In the case of one parent, they did not necessarily feel that the school was interested in or willing to learn about their child’s issues “from a biological standpoint.” In this case, the parent was referring to their child’s neurodiversity.

Family Status

One participant who is a single parent noted that their family adds a diverse perspective and that school needs to be more “gentle.” An example cited was a recent “Daddy Daughter” dance that, by its name, makes certain assumptions about family status. The parent noted that by designating the dance as a “daddy” and “daughter” dance, it created some personal feeling for their family and likely did for students who may have two moms or two dads. This generated an interesting dialogue related to, “Do you take away the dance? Or do you change it? How do you change it?” The parents noted that they would never want anyone to feel left out, but asked, “Do we take it away because it’s not inclusive or do we modify it? What about parents who have to work late? What about a gay mom? Kids wouldn’t care. The kids need to teach us. And we need to change the way we think about things too.” One parent noted, “[We need to] balance tradition and the new and ever-changing.”

Gender Identity

A parent shared that to some extent the district makes attempts to be inclusive, encompassing, and compassionate to all situations, but cautioned that, from their perspective, the district needs to be “careful with their approach,” citing a request to ask students their preferred pronouns. The parent wondered why this information was “relevant to educating [their] child.” They reported that their student said that many of their classmates were confused as to why that was asked and the parent wondered why that question was necessary for middle school students. This parent felt the need to balance “education” vs. different needs of people. Using this example, several other parents in the group shared a contrasting view and felt that it shows that their school is welcoming and that they care to learn about their students. It helps teachers know how to approach their students. A parent mentioned that it’s critical to know the students. It could be meaningful to some individuals that the teacher cares to learn about their pronouns. In the big picture, kids need to understand these things. “Gender identity and sexual orientation: it’s not a big deal to kids. Kids are accepting. [We] want kids to be able to share.”

One parent noted that their daughter got corrected for “using the wrong pronoun.” The parent noted that students are exposed in the media and on social media to the topics of gender and gender identity and these topics are “not being addressed by staff or teachers.” Exposure to topics related to gender/non-conforming is less controlled from a parental perspective given the media and social-media access.

Another parent noted that these topics should be addressed in school, stating, “Personally I would like to see these topics addressed in school. Kids are learning from social media or other kids, not adults. LGBTQ terms—

staff need more education because kids are talking about it anyway. [It is] important to have these discussions.”

Socio-Economic

Income disparities was also noted and the need to help students understand differences in economic circumstances that their friends may be experiencing. Some students notice these differences in the kinds of birthday parties that students host or the kinds of houses they live in. One parent uses these as opportunities to talk to her kids.

Another parent noted that schools need to do a better job of teaching the reasons behind why there are economic disparities experienced by certain groups of individuals. The parent noted, “There’s a lot of history that’s kicked over...things like the Trail of Tears, redlining, etc.” [referring to the use of red marks on maps that loan corporations would use to outline mixed-race or African American neighborhoods.]¹¹ This was less straightforward for another parent, noting “Factual things are factual things, but don’t tell them [the students] how to feel about it or how ‘you’re responsible’...no ‘this is how you should interpret [this]’ because that’s indoctrination.” The parent recognized the importance of teaching and discussing facts, but did want the teacher’s own personal opinions to be overlayed on top of the factual information.

Opportunities to Engage with Other Parents

The focus group participants noted that there are relatively few (if any) opportunities to interact with other parents and caregivers at their school in what they perceived to be a meaningful way. Several noted that the focus group discussion was one of their first opportunities to do so and they appreciated talking with other parents about their experiences and their children. At one school, most of the parents expressed that they do not know the other parents in their children’s classroom. Parents expressed that they wished they had a way to connect with other parents in a more organized way and that having conversations with other parents can help them feel less alone.

For many parents, the primary means of meeting or interacting with other parents tends to be at sports activities or birthday parties, or sometimes at school board meetings. At school-sponsored activities, sometimes parents tend to “stick within their family group.” One parent noted, “[Afterschool program] does some things with parents, but parents separate by family.” The parents expressed an interest in building more opportunities to connect with other parents, as well as increasing volunteer opportunities at school. One noted, “Something that brings everyone together would be nice.”

One parent mentioned that she does see periodic invitations from the school to join Zoom meetings with other parents. However, she noted that she is reluctant to join these meetings. She described feeling reluctant to share her experiences given a concern that the meetings would be largely reflective of the experiences of white, “suburban” families who could not relate to her experiences. The parent felt that her experiences would not matter or be understood in that kind of group setting.

In some cases, parents suggested having small groups focused on specific topics where parents could connect with other parents with similar interests or struggles would be beneficial. For example, a group of other parents who have children with anxiety or IEPs. The parents who participated in one of the middle school

¹¹For background, see <https://www.npr.org/2017/05/03/526655831/a-forgotten-history-of-how-the-u-s-government-segregated-america>

focus groups found the discussion valuable and wondered if they could “keep this going.”¹² They expressed an interest in meeting again about specific topics like coping skills and time management, noting “we learn best from each other” and they can “benefit from someone who actually went through it.” They expressed a need for talking with others with “like situations” and they often wonder, “Is this normal? Is any other parent going through this?” Another idea expressed along these lines was to have a group that could meet to talk about or reflect on a book or article that has a topic relevant to middle school parents (for example, the topic of anxiety). “There is a comfort and camaraderie in the shared experience that can be reassuring.” One parent noted, “Keep doing this!” referring to the focus group discussion.

¹² At the conclusion of one group, the parents wanted to exchange emails so that they could continue the conversations.

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE FOCUS GROUP PROCESS

Parents' Feedback on the Focus Group Format

PARENTS VALUE OPPORTUNITIES TO CONNECT

Those who participated in the focus groups expressed that they generally valued the opportunity to participate and they liked the format and content of the discussion. For many, they expressed that they valued hearing the perspectives and experiences of other parents in a small-group setting. For others, it was a rare occasion where they could interact with other parents from their school. Several noted the value in hearing that things that they were experiencing as parents were similar to experiences of other parents and they could relate to one another. One parent noted, "The more we do these meetings and the more the parents communicate to others, the better. This is a good start."

DEMONSTRATE IMPACT

Very important to the parents is what the school will do with the feedback and information provided. "Did what they [the parents] said make an impact?" Another noted, "Does parent input matter?" The parents who participated in the focus group would be interested in participating in future focus group discussions. However, they want to know their voice and feedback will have an impact or be heard at their school. They do not want to get together just to talk; they want to know how their feedback will be used in a meaningful way. They felt that it is very important to communicate to parents the goal of the meeting and that parents have a clear understanding of why they have been asked to attend. One parent noted, "The follow-up is really important. People want to know their voices are heard. Otherwise, they are wasting their time." They do not expect action on every suggestion, but they want to see even one positive change; something meaningful.

SMALLER GROUPS ARE PREFERABLE TO LARGER GROUPS

Several parents expressed that they preferred the small group discussion in comparison to a larger group format and some noted that they felt that everyone was very open to different ideas, opinions, and suggestions. "It is harder when you have a larger group" and "Let's share in a large group feels uncomfortable too." Several parents liked that the virtual group option was offered and felt that it was an easy format for busy parents to access. This parent commented, "I like having the small group. I like to be in person to observe and see body language. But I'm really busy, so the flexibility to do virtually was really helpful. We appreciate opportunity and the small group format." Another noted, "Going somewhere seems like a chore."

CREATING A CLIMATE OF TRUST AND OPENNESS

The parents noted that the meeting topics and who is facilitating the discussion can drive the comfort level among parents in being open. Some will be open regardless, but they acknowledged that others might hold back depending on the facilitator. In many instances, the parents liked having an "outsider" lead the discussion so that they could feel more open. The parents noted that having a third-party facilitate the discussions was conducive to feeling comfortable being open, yet there could also be benefits of school officials hearing information directly. "Maybe [parents] wouldn't be as open about things that aren't going well. But it would be great to also have an opportunity to have a roundtable with some teachers." Another parent noted, with the school facilitating, "It would be more impactful to hear it firsthand, but people might not be as open." One parent suggested the notion of "sister schools" where a facilitator from one school would host a focus group for another school and vice versa.

GETTING THE “UN-INVOLVED” PARENTS MORE INVOLVED

In one of the groups, the parents recognized and were surprised by the relatively small turnout, which pointed to the challenges of getting parents to attend and participate. “I like hearing other peoples’ perspectives, but you ‘bribed’ us [jokingly referring to the gift card incentive] and only [a few] of us showed up.” Another echoed, “It sounds like a good idea, but I don’t think people will show up.”

In several groups, the parents agreed that already active parents in the school would be the ones to attend focus groups. Getting broader voices and perspectives is important with one noting, “The same parents will sign up for these kinds of things in the future; you will have the super-involved parents. How do you get those [who are not typically involved?” Another noted, “[There are] a lot of parents who are not typically involved. How do you get parents who are not at other things to attend?” In one group, the parents commented that that they may not be reflective of a broader cross-section of family voices and wondered if more could have been done to get more diversity around the table, perhaps by the school doing outreach to individual parents.

The parents in one group speculated as to the reasons for the lower-than-expected turn-out. A prevailing thought was that parents who are not engaged with their children in general are not going to be engaged with their school/teachers and would not be interested in taking time from their busy schedules for a focus group.

SUGGESTION FROM PARENTS TO ORGANIZE ISSUE-SPECIFIC DISCUSSION GROUPS

As a way to potentially increase parent participation, the participants suggested offering discussions on very specific topics or offering sessions twice a year (at the middle and end of the school year). By having the same parents attend each session, it would be an opportunity to discuss changes that might have occurred since the first session. Some noted that evening meetings might be more accessible; another noted that keeping meetings as close to school hours as possible would be helpful. There was interest in continuing to have small group discussions around specific topics, as “Parents are curious and want to be part of the conversation.”

Lessons Learned about the Focus Group Process and Feedback from the Schools

Focus groups can be a valuable method for getting feedback from parents on topics of interest to school leaders. Parents liked the small group format and especially valued the opportunity to connect with other parents. In Table 4 we summarize some of the lessons-learned about the focus group approach used in this project that might be relevant to other schools using focus groups in their parent engagement work.

Table 4 – Lessons Learned About the Focus Group Process

Process	Lessons and Insights
Designing the Interview Guide	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A discussion guide should be developed in advance of the focus group and the topical questions should be simple and straightforward. More detailed prompts can be included in the discussion guide in order to be able to ask follow-up questions, as needed.• Avoid overly dense or complicated questions. Consider piloting the interview guide with a few parents in advance of hosting a larger group to refine question wording and flow.
Scheduling and Logistics	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Offer focus groups on dates and times that are more likely to accommodate parents’ busy schedules. It may be helpful to time the discussion around an event or function when parents will already be at school (before or after a school concert or teacher conferences.)• Consider a location that is convenient and comfortable for parents.• Limit the discussion to 1 to 1.5 hours.• Offer child care while parents participate, if resources allow.• Offer virtual and in-person options. Zoom was used in this project.

Recruiting Participants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A Google Form can be a useful way to keep track of registrations. • Allow adequate time to recruit parents for participation; one-on-one outreach may be the most effective means of ensuring participation. • Make the effort to reach out to parents whose voices may not be typically represented and include parents who are likely to have a range of experiences and perspectives. • Communication and recruitment materials should clearly explain the goals of the focus group, the topics that will be covered, and how the information will be used. If the session will be recorded, that information should be clearly stated in the recruitment materials. • Monitor registrations if using public-facing posts on social media to ensure that the participants who register meet the criteria for inclusion in the discussion. • Provide a meal and/or snacks and beverages if resources allow. • Offer a small stipend of \$20 to \$25 dollars as a small token of appreciation, if possible.
Facilitating the Discussion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider having a neutral, third-party facilitate the discussion so that parents feel more comfortable being open.
Following-Up	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Email a thank you to all participants after the session. • Ensure confidentiality by not reporting quotes and comments by participant name. • Do not report the names of the participants unless given permission in advance. • Provide a draft of a report of the focus group findings back to the participants for their review so they can see how their group's feedback was summarized. • Communicate to parents how the information discussed in a focus group will be used to consider change and improvements. Parents want to know that their feedback matters.

APPENDIX A - EXAMPLE OF PARENT EMAIL OR LETTER

SUBJECT: Invite to a discussion on improving our school's engagement with families

As parents and caregivers, you play a significant role in supporting your children's learning. North Crawford Elementary School was recently selected as one of five schools from across Wisconsin to participate in the ***Building Better Connections with Families Project***.^{*} Through small group discussions, this project will gather feedback and information directly from parents and caregivers that can be used to create better partnerships between schools and families and to improve the learning environment for students. Discussions will be held at all five schools in the next several months.

As a parent/caregiver of a North Crawford Elementary School student(s), I would value your participation in an upcoming discussion group with other North Crawford parents and caregivers about a range of topics related to how we engage with families. These discussion groups will have approximately 6 to 10 participants from our school. The discussions will be facilitated by staff from the University of Wisconsin's (UW) Wisconsin Institute for Public Policy and Service (WIPPS). No school personnel, teachers, staff, or administrators will be observing or listening to the discussions, as we want parents and caregivers to be comfortable providing open and honest feedback.

REGISTER HERE with this LINK:

Virtual Zoom session - Wednesday, March 30 from 6:00 to 8:00 pm

In-person session at school – Wednesday, April 13 from 5:00 to 7:00 pm

<https://forms.gle/dPAHkBskiGuTyFZ18>

All participants will receive a \$25 gift card in appreciation of their time. It is important to note that when feedback is shared with schools, no one is identified personally by name.

A detailed information sheet about the project is attached. I hope you will consider participating and thank you in advance for your time. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at akilleen@ncrawford.k12.wi.us or at 608-624-5201 ext. 232. You may also contact Sharon Belton, Director of WIPPS Research Partners and project manager at sbelton@uwsa.edu or at 715-302-8483.

Thank you.

Amanda Killeen, Principal
North Crawford Elementary School

^{*}This project was developed collaboratively by the offices of Governor Tony Evers and First Lady Kathy Evers, the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, the Wisconsin Office of Children's Mental Health, and WIPPS. Funding for this project was provided by the National Governors' Association Center for Best Practices.

APPENDIX B - EXAMPLE OF INFORMATIONAL FLYER

BUILDING BETTER CONNECTIONS WITH FAMILIES PROJECT PARENTS and CAREGIVERS! We Want to Hear from You! HUDSON MIDDLE SCHOOL



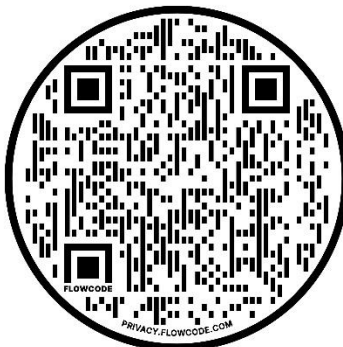
Opportunity to Provide Feedback that Can Improve the Learning Environment at Our School

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS PROJECT? As parents, guardians, or caregivers you play a significant role in supporting your children's learning. The **Building Better Connections with Families Project** uses a facilitated small group discussion format to gather feedback and information directly from parents and caregivers that can be used to create better partnerships between schools and families and to improve the learning environment for students. Hudson Middle School was one of five schools from across Wisconsin selected to participate in this project. This project was developed collaboratively by the offices of Governor Tony Evers and First Lady Kathy Evers, the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, the Wisconsin Office of Children's Mental Health, and the University of Wisconsin's (UW) Wisconsin Institute for Public Policy and Service (WIPPS). Funding for this project was provided by the National Governors' Association Center for Best Practices.

WHAT ARE THE DATES? Each participant can choose either the in-person or the virtual session. Registration in advance is required so that we can plan accordingly. Spots are limited to up to 10 per group.

IN PERSON AT SCHOOL			VIRTUAL VIA ZOOM		
Tuesday	March 29	5:30 to 7:30 pm Hudson Middle School (room is pending)	Tuesday	April 5	5:30 to 7:30 pm Zoom link will be emailed 24-48 hrs. prior

HOW TO REGISTER? Click here to register or scan the QR code: <https://forms.gle/8cfNquZjA1aQ7qHr6>



WHO CAN PARTICIPATE? Parents, guardians, and caregivers of students enrolled in Hudson Middle School are able to participate in these discussions.

WHAT WILL PARTICIPANTS TALK ABOUT IN THE DISCUSSION GROUPS?

WIPPS will facilitate two small focus group discussions with parents and caregivers at our school. Separate focus groups will also be held with parents and caregivers at each of the other four designated school sites. These discussions are designed to gather open and honest feedback on a range of topics such as:

- What role do you want to play in partnership with our school to support your child's learning and development?
- What makes you feel like your voice, feedback, and opinions matter or are valued by our school community?
- How can we better engage with and improve communication with families? What should we keep doing? Stop doing?
- How can we improve how we honor or value the diversity of families in our school community?
- How can we partner with you to support your child's overall mental health and well-being?
- What is most important to you when you think about your child's mental health and well-being and the development of their social and emotional skills?

The feedback that is shared during these discussions will not only help our school, but it will also be combined with feedback provided by parents and caregivers at the other participating schools and will be shared with school leaders across the state. It is important to note that when feedback is shared, no one is identified personally by name.

HOW WILL THE FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS BE CONDUCTED?

- A maximum of 10 individuals will be in each group. Each focus group discussion will last about 1.5 to 2 hours.
- Spots are limited so please register early!
- Virtual and in-person options are available. Virtual sessions will be conducted using Zoom.
- Only members of the WIPPS Research Partners project team will facilitate and/or observe the discussions. Teachers, principals, school counselors, or other school staff members will not participate or observe.
- The discussions will be recorded to help with the analysis. The recordings and notes will be kept private. Only members of the project team at WIPPS will use the recordings or notes. They will not be shared with anyone.
- After the focus groups are completed, WIPPS Research Partners will analyze the information to identify common themes. The findings will be compiled along with information from other schools into a summary report that will provide insights for schools across Wisconsin who are looking to improve how they engage with parents. You will also receive a copy of the report.
- You will NOT be personally identified in the report. Any quotes or comments included in the report will NOT be attributed to anyone by name. Names or other identifiable information will NOT be used in the report.
- Participants will receive a \$25 gift card in appreciation of their participation (Kwik Trip or County Market).
- Supervised child care will be provided for those attending the in-person session.

WHY IS WIPPS RESEARCH PARTNERS CONDUCTING THE DISCUSSIONS?

- Our school leaders want these sessions to be an opportunity for parents to provide open and honest feedback about these topics and has partnered with WIPPS Research Partners to conduct the discussion groups as a neutral, objective group. The Wisconsin Institute for Public Policy and Service (WIPPS) Research Partners, a unit of the University of Wisconsin System, has a long-history of helping Wisconsin schools, businesses, non-profits, and other organizations with focus groups, surveys and other similar projects. Based in Wausau at the UW Stevens Point at Wausau Campus, you can find more information about WIPPS here:

<https://wipps.org/research-partners/>

QUESTIONS? Contact Sharon Belton, Director of WIPPS Research Partners and project manager at sbelton@uwsa.edu or at 715-302-8483. Or Fafani Weinzierl, Assistant Director of Student Services at weinzierl@hudsonraiders.org or at 715-377-3700 ext. 8027.

APPENDIX C - INTERVIEW GUIDE

BUILDING BETTER CONNECTIONS WITH FAMILIES PROJECT PARENT FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW GUIDE

INTRODUCTIONS

- Facilitator, observer, technical support (if virtual)

WHY ARE WE HERE TODAY? (5 minutes)

As parents or guardians, you play a significant role in supporting your children's learning. Your school is participating in the **Building Better Connections with Families Project** because your school leaders are genuinely interested in learning more about how to better partner with parents like yourselves to improve the learning environment at your school. Your school leaders want your open and honest feedback on the topics that we will discuss today. And we are having similar discussions like this with parents at other schools around the state. So, we will be able to take your feedback and combine it with feedback we get from parents at other schools to provide some insights for schools across Wisconsin who looking to improve how they engage with parents.

BEFORE WE BEGIN, LET'S GO OVER A FEW GROUND-RULES

We will be recording the discussion today. While we take notes, sometimes we need to go back and listen to what is said again to be sure we heard a comment correctly. The recordings will not be shared with anyone at school. Not the principal, teachers, or staff. We do typically include quotes and comments in the reports to illustrate particular themes, but we do not quote anyone by name. Nothing you say today will be attributed to you by name in our report. And you will get a copy of the report when it is finished.

Our discussion will last about an hour and a half to two hours. There are no right or wrong answers, so we encourage you to give your honest, authentic opinions. Keep in mind that we are just as interested in negative comments as positive ones. And it is okay to disagree, but please do so respectfully.

If there are questions you are uncomfortable answering, you can pass or feel free to send your thoughts to [observer's name] [privately in the chat function] or [via email after the meeting if in-person.] In order to ensure all voices are heard, there may be times when I ask some of you to shorten your comments. I may encourage some of you to share more thoughts if we haven't heard from you in a bit.¹³

Lastly, please respect each other's privacy. You are welcome to discuss with others the kinds of things we talk about today. In fact, we encourage you share your take-aways from our conversation. But please do not to talk with others about specific comments made by one person or another by their name. This will allow everyone to feel comfortable talking openly.

Are there any questions?

¹³ Depending on the size of the group, a "round-robin" approach can be a useful way to ensure all participants are able to weigh in on a particular topic. However, with a larger group, this may not be possible. The facilitator should look for opportunities to draw-in those who may be quieter. In a virtual session, the observer may also wish to send a private chat message to the facilitator if he/she notices a parent who may not have had a chance to offer their views as a reminder to ask "Jane" or "John" to weigh-in.]

A CURRENT SNAPSHOT OF PARENT/FAMILY ENGAGEMENT (30 minutes)

I want to start out by talking about the topic of how **parents engage with and connect with the teachers, staff, and administrators at your school**. These can be ways in which parents like yourselves partner with – or have opportunities to partner with – your child’s school that make you feel welcome and included in your child’s learning and development.

Each of you may have different experiences or perspectives on how you connect with your school. For some of you, your perspectives may be shaped by what it was like for you to be a student or by how your family approached interacting with your teachers growing up. For others, it may be shaped by your cultural background or how others in your community commonly interact with schools and teachers. All of these experiences are meaningful and we want to hear your views on these topics, even if they differ from someone else’s.

1. From your personal perspective, can you describe the kind of role that you as a parent *ideally* want to play in partnership with your school in your child’s learning and development?
2. Thinking about this school year in particular, can you briefly describe a specific example or situation where you had an especially positive or successful experience engaging with or partnering with the teachers, staff, or administrators at your school about something related to your child’s learning or development?
3. Again, thinking about this school year, can you briefly describe a specific example or situation where you had an especially negative or disappointing experience engaging with or partnering with the teachers, staff, or administrators at your school about something related to your child’s learning or development?
4. As a parent, what kinds of actions make you feel like your voice, feedback, and opinions matter or are valued by your school community? You can answer this question in a few ways: you can give a specific example of things your school has done that have made you feel like your voice matters as a parent, or you can talk about what you like to see your school do.

IMPROVING PARENT ENGAGEMENT AND COMMUNICATION: KEEP, STOP, START (30 minutes)

Let’s shift our discussion to getting your ideas and feedback on how to change or improve how parents engage with your school community and teachers.

5. I want to have what I describe as a **KEEP, STOP, and START** discussion. Imagine you have an opportunity to speak directly with your school leaders, teachers, and staff about how to better engage with and improve communication with parents like yourselves. We are going to talk about things you want your school to keep doing and also things you want your school to stop doing. And we will also talk about your ideas for things they should start doing to better. All ideas are welcome, including things you might have heard about what other schools or doing, or things you might think about your own experiences going to school. Remember, we want to share your thoughts with your school leaders, but with others across the state so that they can improve.***
 - a. First, what are some specific things you think your school should **KEEP** doing because you think these things help you feel more welcome, engaged, and included at school with your child’s learning?

- b. I now want you think about some specific things you think your school should **STOP** doing because they make you feel unwelcome at school or excluded from your child's learning?
- c. Lastly, I want to talk about your ideas for some new things you wish your school would **START** doing because you think they would help improve or promote better engagement and communication between you and your school.

***FOR FACILITATOR/OBSERVER – these are types of responses that parents may mention in response to the questions above.¹⁴

Communication (one way and two-way)

- Ensuring regular and effective two-way communication
- Opportunities to talk with teachers and build relationship with teachers
- Home visits
- Phone call home from the teacher to the parent on a regular basis
- Post-card or note home from the teacher to the parent on a regular basis
- Materials communicated in home language, including written materials
- Translator available at school events
- Training staff to work well with parents

Partnering in Learning Process

- Providing parents with information and skills they need to support healthy attitudes, behaviors, and environments
- Opportunities to provide feedback to teachers and share opinions
- Acting on parents' input
- Asking parents to build/plan learning approaches
- Teacher-provided "at home" work for parents and students to do together > from teacher to parent
- Creating healthy education activities that parents and students can do together at home
- Collaborating with community groups that can benefit students and families

School Involvement and Decision-Making

- Finding meaningful ways that busy parents can be involved
- Offering a wide variety of volunteer opportunities
- Encouraging parents to be part of decision making at school

Problem-Solving

- Solving conflicts in scheduling and transportation
- Overcoming language and cultural barriers
- Ensuring administrative and financial support.

CULTURAL RESPONSIVENESS (20 minutes)

Each family has its own voice and diversity in different ways. Think about the ways your family brings diverse perspectives and strengths to your school community.

6. In your experience, does your school community recognize and value the diverse perspectives and strengths of your family? [For FACILITATOR: Follow-up with: Why or why not?]

¹⁴ <https://www.ascd.org/el/articles/involvement-or-engagement>
<https://www2.ed.gov/documents/family-community/partners-education.pdf>
<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1124003.pdf>

7. What is one specific idea you have or something specific your school could do to improve how it honors or values the diversity of families and helps families feel more included in the school community?

MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING (20 minutes)

I now want to shift our discussion to the topic of mental health and well-being. With mental health and well-being we include learning and activities that help students better understand their thoughts and feelings; develop a positive identity; and establish and maintain healthy relationships.¹⁵ For younger students, this might mean developing skills such as describing and expressing emotions appropriately, or taking turns. For older students, this might mean setting goals and working to achieve them.

8. When you think about your child’s mental health and well-being, including the development of your child’s social and emotional learning skills, what skills or characteristics come to mind as being the most important to you for your child to develop during their [elementary or middle school] years?
[FACILITATOR: Adjust accordingly based on whether it is an elementary or middle school discussion.]

***For FACILITATOR/OVSERVER – listen for a range of parent responses based on the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) framework - responses may reflect a range of ideas, such as:

- self-awareness: identifying emotions and demonstrating honesty and integrity
- self-management: exhibiting self-discipline and demonstrating agency
- social awareness: perspectives and demonstrating empathy
- relationship skills: practicing teamwork and communicating effectively
- responsible decision-making: demonstrating curiosity and identifying solutions for problems

9. Ideally, how should your school partner with you to support your child’s mental health and well-being?
[FACILITATOR: listen for a range of responses, including those who feel that these skills are a parents’ responsibility, or that learning these skills exists inside and outside the classroom.]

OPPORTUNITIES TO ENGAGE WITH OTHER PARENTS (*optional – if time allows* - 10 minutes)

10. We have talked a lot today about how parents connect with teachers, staff, and administrators at your school. Now I’d like to hear about how parents connect with each other. Does your school provide specific opportunities for you to connect with other parents to share your ideas or concerns with each other?

FACILITATOR/OBSERVER: Examples of creating connections between parents

- Opportunities for parents to meet with one another, class suppers or events
- Service projects – school-wide and in partnership with the community
- “Buddy” system for parents/parent mentor/parent navigator
- Parent meetings held where families work, eat, live, ship, go to church, etc.

11. What did you think about this kind of small group discussion as a way to engage with other parents at your school?

¹⁵ <https://dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/imce/sspw/SEL-Competencies-Guide-web.pdf>
<https://dpi.wi.gov/sspw/mental-health/social-emotional-learning>

CLOSING (flexible)

Finally, I'd like to open the floor and ask – is there anything we should be talking about that I haven't mentioned today?

If you do think of something you wish to share, or if there is something you'd prefer to share privately, you can contact me at: [provide a card with phone number and email or add email to the chat box if virtual. I would like to thank you again for taking the time to participate in this discussion and for openly sharing your thoughts and experiences that can help your school, as well as other schools in Wisconsin, connect and engage with parents.

As a reminder, we will be compiling your feedback into a report and sharing it with you and your school leaders, as well as with school leaders in other communities. We also will share what we learned from our discussions with parents with state policymakers and public officials. And again, you have our assurance that we will not be sharing anything you said today with others by name.

Distribute gift cards, if applicable or explain that a gift card will be mailed if virtual.
Follow-up survey, if applicable.